

Opinion

Arabia awaits its spring

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Staggeringly corrupt and repressed, Saudi Arabia is ripe for revolution. But fear deters reformers from declaring their views

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Let us strangle the last king with the guts of the last priest," the French 18th century philosopher Denis Diderot said. The same phrase is now widely repeated across Arabia - or [Saudi Arabia](#), as it is currently named under the dynastic autocracy. It is only a matter of time before the revolutions that have swept the Arab world in the past year reach the Saudi kingdom.

Most of the factors that led to the Arab uprisings are present in Arabia. The Saudi regime holds tens of thousands of political prisoners, most without charge - just one example of the oppression people suffer. The scale of corruption is staggering. In the most recent budget alone, \$100bn is unaccounted for. In this country with its huge oil revenue, unemployment rates are soaring (currently more than 30%), the average salary is less than \$1,300 (£820) a month, with a huge discrepancy between classes, and 22% of the population live in poverty. As a result of corruption, the oil wealth has had little impact on the quality of life of the average citizen, as is the case in neighbouring Gulf countries.

What is worse is that the royal family continues to treat the country and its people as its private property. Instead of attempting to provide the citizens with the strong identity people long for, they have reinforced the subjugation to the royal family of Al-Saud.

Furthermore, as elsewhere in the Arab world, the expansion in communication tools has broken down barriers and deprived the Saudi regime of the secrecy and deception on which its legitimacy relied. Opposition-run satellite stations now voice an alternative message, while the internet and mobiles allow easy interaction, making virtual debates more effective than real ones.

In the past couple of months, one anonymous twitter account, *@mujtahidd*, has attracted more than 220,000 followers thanks to its ability to expose corruption in a detailed, accurate manner. *@mujtahidd* has already published thousands of remarkably well informed tweets about several royal family members, including the king. The popularity of *@mujtahidd* has gone beyond Twitter; it has become the talk of the nation. So much so that blocking his account inside the kingdom did nothing to stop the number of followers escalating. This readiness to embrace the campaign of leaks by an anonymous individual is a demonstration of how little people trust the country's official media.

Reformists from many different backgrounds are increasingly audible in society. Most are from the religious ranks - as has been the case in other Arab countries where upheavals occurred. It is these religious reformers themselves, not the liberals, who repeat Diderot's call for a settling of accounts with both princes and their tame religious hierarchy.

It is this kind of apparent contradiction - along with the complexity of Arabia's geopolitical map - which makes many observers incapable of forecasting the kingdom's political future.

The western media, where they notice the ferment in Arabia at all, focus on the Shia revolt and the position of women. It is true that the Shia are very active in protest - their demonstrations are massive. However, they are a minority and the regime links them with Iran, so their protests remain isolated and self-contained. The regime has so far successfully used these protests in its favour, by persuading the Sunni majority of a threat of a Shia "takeover" of the Eastern province.

And within Arabia, where both sexes are deprived of their basic rights, the west's focus on women's rights has backfired, as it has become twinned with unpopular "western" values.

Paying attention exclusively to these two questions suits the Saudi regime because it gives the impression that it is not facing other distracts from more far-reaching challenges that threaten its very existence. The regime is more concerned with its portrayal in the west as a stable and resilient regime than being seen as serving minority rights or encouraging western values. Any major internal challenge to its stability would result in western powers losing confidence in its ability to serve their interest.

So why hasn't revolution yet reached Arabia? The traditional inhibitions are still there. Despite the widespread conviction that a comprehensive change of regime is necessary, reformers remain hesitant about declaring their views, let alone taking .

The official religious establishment, whose members are directly appointed by the king, continue to appease the regime in a country where religion is the main player in politics. People are bombarded with scaremongering in the media which associates change with chaos and bloodshed as in Yemen, Syria and Libya.

More significant still is the level of distrust between activists, making any collective act of protest difficult. Political activism in Arabia has been almost

nonexistent, while terms such as freedom of expression, power sharing, transparency and accountability are seen as alien.

This does not mean change is impossible. Even the heir to the throne, Prince Nayef, (Crown Prince, deputy PM and Interior Minister) is regarded with so little reverence that there are calls from within the country to bring him to trial. One activist wrote an open letter to Nayef saying protests would erupt after his departure of the current king (the king is 90). Meanwhile official religious scholars are being rejected in favour of independent ones because the religious establishment is increasingly being seen as a partner in corruption.

Scaremongering in the Saudi media - about a Shi'a takeover, for example - will continue to be effective until people reach the threshold where fear becomes irrelevant –as has proved to be the case in Syria and elsewhere in the region.

As for the international support for the regime, from America and Europe, this is already backfiring as the people see Al-Saud selling the country to western "masters".

The balance of factors in Arabia is clearly tipping in the direction of profound change. Change of such a scale is usually triggered either by an expected event - such as the death of the king - or an unexpected incident - as was the case with Bouazizi, whose self-immolation sparked Tunisia's revolt.

Two weeks ago, a tribe in Taif, near Mecca, prevented the security forces enforcing a royal order confiscating their land. They forced the authorities to cancel the confiscation order by physical protest. Across the country, people are asking: if one small tribe can regain its land through peaceful protest, why shouldn't the entire nation reclaim its rights in a similar way?

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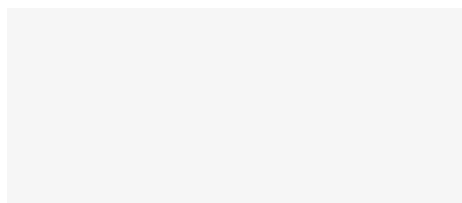
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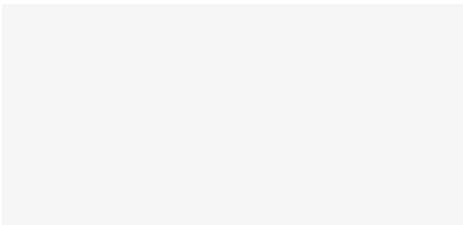
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